

Traditionally and in fact most appropriately, the history of English is divided into four distinct periods: Old, Middle, Early Modern and Modern English. Old English covers a period from the second half of the first millennium to roughly around 1100, ending shortly after the Norman Conquest. It is a period in which English still was a dominantly synthetic language and it is certainly different from any English spoken since. The language of this period was influenced by and in contact (language contact) with Latin and what is called Old Norse, i.e. the language of Scandinavian seafarers and settlers. As in later stages, English lexicon at this stage of its development was (amongst other features) characterized by frequent borrowings from contact languages, i.e. by taking over words from them. With the beginning of the Middle English period a change in typology becomes evident, which was never a question of “a few years” around the Norman Conquest but certainly a process taking a much longer time. Middle English may and is however generally labeled as being an analytic language. More careful scholars might say it is “increasingly analytic”. In Middle English we trace, next to continued and renewed Latin influences, strong influences of various predecessors of modern French: Norman dialects at an early stage and Central French influence as time went by. As a consequence we trace an ongoing expansion of the lexicon, i.e. borrowing, especially in areas influenced by the new ruling classes. Another drastic and important change starting in Middle English (around 1400), though not ending until well into, possibly even at the end of, Early Modern English (c. 1800), was the so-called Great Vowel Shift (GVS). The GVS is best (though imperfectly, but see Advanced Reading) defined as a process in which all long vowels become raised to higher and closer positions, with “position” referring to articulation. A final and equally important process starting in the Middle English period was that of the standardization of the English language. As this is a long and complex story in itself, it shall suffice to say that it started even before 1400 and that it is widely finished around 1800, as well. Important stages in this process are the medieval Chancery Lane, an administrative center of a certain influence in official language use, the printing press, though with de-standardizing effects in the beginning, the first dictionaries and grammars and finally the Elementary Educational Act, though slightly after the period given above, i.e. in 1870. This is already deep inside what we call the Early Modern English period, the start of which is usually placed around 1500, that is in a time of drastic change in Europe (reformation, renaissance etc.) and after e.g. the discovery of America. ModE is also characterized by a continued and refreshed influence of Romance and Classic languages on its lexicon, due to e.g. the renaissance, and also by the continuation of both the GVS and the process of standardization. Also, the development towards an increasingly analytic language type continues. After 1750 the Modern English period begins. Again, some scholars claim earlier or

later dates, a fact that is again due to all periodization being a mere means of structuring a long history and basically any date being more or less arbitrary and disputable. Still, most drastic change phenomena are widely finished by this time and English has taken a shape that makes it look much like the English we know today. However, the journey of English continues as you read, as change is an ever present facet of language.